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Harvard educator was demoted after using intelligence funds

By Patrick E. Cole
Beacon Journal staff writer

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — When Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies wanted to hold a conference on Islam and Politics last spring, Professor Nadav Safran, the center's director, could find only one willing sponsor: the Central Intelligence Agency.

The center's executive committee advised Safran to seek other sources, but if they could not be found, he should disclose the CIA's sponsorship to participants. But he failed to tell university officials about the contract.

In early October, the university's dean for research learned from a newspaper reporter the conference was funded by the CIA.

On Jan. 1, after an investigation by A. Michael Spence, dean of Harvard's faculty of arts and sciences, it was announced Safran would resign his post in June because of CIA sponsorship of the conference.

Safran made three mistakes when he decided to seek CIA support: "He did not disclose the contract with the dean, he did not disclose the source of support to the conference's participants and he did not channel the contracts through the university," said Margery Heffron, assistant director of Harvard's news office.

Safran, who will stay at Harvard as a tenured professor, declined to discuss his decision to step down as director.

But he recently told Time magazine the CIA's sponsorship of the conference did not affect his objectivity and independence.

"Commitment to truth," he told the magazine "does not depend on the sources of the funding, but on the integrity of the scholar."

Harvard's rules, however, do not rely on integrity alone. Its 1977 intelligence agency guidelines require faculty members to disclose CIA contracts with their dean and Harvard's president.

In addition, the university's sponsored-research policy requires professors to disclose a research sponsor's name and the educator to retain the right to publish the results.

And Harvard is not alone. A random survey of other universities nationwide and in Ohio by the Beacon Journal show while contracts with intelligence agencies are not prohibited, faculty members engaging in research sponsored privately or by the government must disclose it to university officials.

Unlike Harvard, the University of Akron does not have a policy on accepting research funding from outside sources, according to Charmaine Streharsky, assistant director of research services and sponsored programs.

"But we do have a case-by-case, lengthy, internal review process for external support," she said, involving the faculty member's department head, dean, vice president for business and finance, controller and senior vice president and the provost.

Thomas Moss, dean of graduate studies at Case Western University in Cleveland, said projects involving such funding must go through a three-tier review process that includes him, the faculty member's department chairman and dean.

Universities generally require faculty members to disclose the results of research to promote the free dissemination of information. "Unlike a think tank, a university has a goal to train and educate students and to promote knowledge," said Frank Tepe, associate vice president of the University of Cincinnati's graduate division.

Eugene Wenninger, Kent State University's dean for research and sponsored programs, said KSU permits faculty to do classified research for the government, but proposals must be approved by his office and the university research council.

"Any faculty member wanting to undertake a classified project must explain why he or she wishes to undertake the project and how it fits in with the purposes of the university," he said.

John A. Flower, provost of Cleveland State University, said the institution does not accept proposals for classified research.

David Love, associate dean of Oberlin College's college of arts and sciences, said the issue has never come up. But he said the college is currently doing a research project for the Office of Naval Research in Washington, D. C.